



Bank Street

Occasional Paper Series

Occasional
Paper
Series

Volume 2021

Number 45 *Welcoming Narratives in Education:
A Tribute to the Life Work of Jonathan Silin*

Article 13

April 2021

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Recommended Citation

Gilbert, J. (2021). Ambivalent Legacies: A Response to Harper Keenan. *Occasional Paper Series*, 2021 (45). Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/occasional-paper-series/vol2021/iss45/13>

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Ambivalent Legacies: A Response to Harper Keenan

Jen Gilbert

Harper Keenan's generous letter to beginning queer/trans teachers hinges on the question: How do we stand in that impossible moment when we are welcoming newcomers while still acknowledging our debts to those who've come before? Jonathan Silin, whose work this issue celebrates, grapples with these questions of legacy in an essay that reflects on his contributions as an early childhood educator and researcher and a gay rights and HIV/AIDS activist. Silin (2020) asks:

Is it possible to leave behind traditional ideas about legacy, weighted down as they are with commitments to social and biological reproduction, and reimagine it as something more ethereal, more queer if you will, that might lead to unthought possibilities? (p. 55)

Harper's letter is one possible response to Jonathan's question. If social and biological reproduction—what Jack Halberstam (2011) calls “straight time”—tend toward conservatism, loyalty, and continuity, then queer legacies will make room for “unthought possibilities,” including the gestures of welcome, like Harper's letter, that open the door before knowing who has arrived. Harper invites queer/trans beginning teachers into the dance party and introduces them to the guests who came earlier—Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, Paula Grossman and Steve Dain, and Jonathan Silin. Harper reminds the new teachers that their welcome was made possible by all these earlier activists. Indeed, the fact that they are able to walk in the front door and call themselves queer and trans teachers was made possible by the protests and politics of activists. For Harper, activism is education.

Even as beginning queer and trans teachers inherit this rich legacy, their professional lives bear the scars of conflict, violence, and loss. Two recent special issues on queer and trans teachers trace the effects of this ambivalent legacy. In “Gay Voices Without Intersectionality is White Supremacy,” editors Christian Bracho and Cleveland Hayes (2020) bring together a collection of narratives of queer educators of color that insist educational institutions are constituted through the colliding forces of homophobia and racism—even as these institutions offer spaces of refuge and revolt. In “LGBTIQ+ Teachers: Stories from the Field” (Gilbert & Gray, 2020), researchers—including Harper and Jonathan—catalog the ongoing difficulties of being a queer/trans educator in schools organized around heterosexuality and the gender binary, and the hope, joy, and revolt that give teachers' lives meaning. Beginning queer/trans teachers enter into this contested and contradictory space.

Yet these histories of activism have failed to guarantee the change these new educators deserve. When I talk with queer and trans pre-service teachers, they describe the violence they face in their practicum placements—uneven access to all-gender washrooms; put-downs from students; casual homophobia from colleagues. But they

also face a hostility that is more ephemeral—a suspicion that floats through the air, invisible, but threatening. As Harper’s letter suggests, and as the research on queer teachers bears out, queer and trans sexualities and genders sit uncomfortably inside the category of “teacher” (c.f., Connell, 2014; Gray, 2013; Mayo, 2008).

Just as schools protect some fantasy about the innocence of children (Silin, 1995), the queer/trans teacher represents a potential assault on that innocence. Indeed, the queer/trans teacher too often must stand as a role model, sanitizing all the queer aspects of their sexualities and genders so they won’t precociously introduce sexuality and gender transgressions to their students. For queer/trans teachers of color, the burden is double and the normativity of “teacher” even more constraining (Brockenborough, 2012). If the queer/trans teacher is now sometimes invited to the party, they must follow this very strict dress code.

It didn’t have to be this way. As Harper affirms in his letter, teachers have been at the forefront of struggles for queer and trans equality. In both Canada and the United States, LGBTQ teachers’ demands for employment protection were instrumental in securing early civil rights victories. But these victories came with a cost. Historian Jackie Blount (2006) argues that in the late 1970s, after several bruising fights over gay and lesbian teachers’ rights, the mainstream US gay and lesbian movement abandoned the cause of gay and lesbian teachers because they saw it as too politically risky. Instead, they moved in a safer direction and sought to disrupt the idea that children are always and only heterosexual as they had been portrayed in many of these struggles. The gay civil rights movement concentrated on the “gay teen,” with campaigns to call attention to and alleviate their suffering. Going forward, gay youth would carry the mantle of LGBTQ civil rights in education, and gay and lesbian teachers were, in some sense, dumped.

Queer/trans beginning teachers inherit this ambivalent history. As Emily Gray and I argue (2020, p. 1), beginning queer/trans teachers

often enter education programs precisely because their schools have been important sites of learning about their sexual and gender identities. These students came out in high school, organized QSAs [Queer-Straight Alliances], took their same-sex partners to prom, and even if the school wasn’t always welcoming, they felt a commitment to making schooling more inclusive for young queer and trans students. And so, they decide to become teachers themselves.

These beginning teachers are living the legacy offered to them by the queer/trans teacher activists that Harper documents. But that legacy is painful—as high school students, these young teachers benefited from the abandonment of gay and lesbian teachers as a civil rights project in favor of queer and trans youth. But now, entering the profession with its enduring normativity, they feel, as well, the failures of that legacy to make teaching a more welcoming space for queer/trans teachers.

Harper's letter is a beautiful attempt at repair. It connects contemporary queer/trans teachers with the histories that live inside the profession—the revolt, anger, and protest, but also the disappointment, loss, and struggle. His letter offers new teachers a place to stand, an orientation, and a vantage. They can see the history behind them and use that perspective to imagine new futures. What impresses me most is Harper's commitment to the well-being of the queer/trans teacher, a commitment he shares with Jonathan Silin.

In much of his writing, Jonathan asks teachers to connect their personal lives with their work with young children. In a well-known conversation with Didi Khayatt (1999) about whether gay and lesbian teachers should come out in the classroom, Jonathan (1999) risks a yes. But his rationale diverges from the idealized language of role models or the needs of students. Instead, coming out or being out or sharing parts of your life at school should be about being able to live in your own skin, being able to feel like yourself. Such a risk is necessary if we are to survive in the profession. To borrow Harper's image, it makes us a better dance partner, more able to "be together" in the moment—crowded as it is with the histories of those who came before.

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